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Viewing cable 09SKOPJE201, REFLECTING ON BRANKO CRVENKOVSKI'S PRESIDENCY

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09SKOPJE201	2009-05-06 11:19	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Skopje

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SKOPJE 000201

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SUBJECT: REFLECTING ON BRANKO CRVENKOVSKI'S PRESIDENCY

REF: A. 08 SKOPJE 512

[1](#)B. 08 SKOPJE 140

[1](#)C. 08 SKOPJE 696

[1](#)D. 08 SKOPJE 327

Classified By: Ambassador Reeker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: As his five-year Presidential term comes to an end May 12, Branko Crvenkovski prepares himself for yet another political transition --this time returning to resurrect his opposition Social Democrats (SDSM), in shambles following devastating losses in 2008 parliamentary and 2009 municipal and presidential elections. Not deterred by the substantial work ahead, Crvenkovski believes time is on his side as he rebuilds the party and continues to be a thorn in the side of PM Gruevski. His presidency was marked by a genuine dislike between the two and a tendency for each to score-keep rather than unite to advance Macedonia,s goals. The Embassy has enjoyed a good relationship with Crvenkovski, who has proven generally more reasonable, reliable and sophisticated than Gruevski, especially in strategic thinking on international relations. But Crvenkovski is also a ruthless politician who has not hesitated to oppose positive steps (passage of a language law, recognition of Kosovo) in an effort to score points with the ethnic Macedonian community. He is self-promoting and a chameleon who reinvented himself with the changing environment. The term of his successor, politically-inexperienced professor Gjorge Ivanov, will likely be markedly different than his own. Handpicked by Gruevski as VMRO-DPMNE,s candidate, Ivanov is unlikely to be a strong independent voice. Ivanov is also unlikely to make the same impression that Crvenkovski did -- of an experienced politician with a good sense of how the world works. End Summary.

His Presidency

12. (C) Crvenkovski,s dislike for and opposition to the policies of PM Gruevski was never kept out of the public eye. Daily battles in the media marked their relationship, which at times became so tense that they would not be in the same room together. They presented a divided front which made progress on Euro-Atlantic integration exceedingly difficult. Crvenkovski believes that Macedonian policy should be a "three-legged stool" -- inter-ethnic issues, the economy, and international engagement; he says openly that Gruevski has failed in all three. Gruevski, always over-sensitive to criticism, has long been intimidated by Crvenkovski -- a fact that Crvenkovski knew well and used to his advantage.

13. (SBU) Though the office of the Presidency is constitutionally much less powerful than that of the PM, Crvenkovski used his limited powers strategically. Most notably, he ended a standoff and secured the return to Parliament of boycotting SDSM and e-Albanian party DPA in August 2008 (reftel A) by pardoning SDSM leader Zoran Zaev and refusing to sign the laws adopted under emergency procedures in the absence of the opposition. Though the refusal to sign the laws was only a ceremonial veto (a second parliamentary vote passed them with ease and forced Crvenkovski,s signature), he was able to mark his scorecard with a strategic win on that one.

Crvenkovski on the Name Dispute and Euro-Atlantic Integration

14. (C) President Crvenkovski generally thought more strategically about the name issue than PM Gruevski, heeding our advice and encouraging Gruevski not to say "no" to Nimetz proposals -- even what he viewed as "the worst Nimetz had ever tabled" in February 2008 (reftel B), instead calling on the PM to highlight what was acceptable in the proposal. Crvenkovski told us on several occasions that he did not think Gruevski was serious about wanting to resolve the name dispute, and instead tried to "freeze it," especially with a return to the non-starter "double name formula" (one name for relations with Greece, the constitutional name for everyone else) in response to the October 2008 Nimetz proposal. Shocked and disappointed by the government,s 2007 renaming of Skopje airport to "Aleksandar the Great Airport"

(Crvenkovski told the Ambassador that when he got wind of it he immediately inquired of FM Milososki, who initially also expressed shock. After Milososki discovered Gruevski had personally ordered the name change, Milososki changed his tune and said he supported it). Crvenkovski also questioned the utility of the suit against Greece in the ICJ for violating the 1995 Interim Accord (reftel C). Crvenkovski saw the government actions through a prism that Gruevski seemingly never used -- that of whether it would provoke Greece unnecessarily or hinder progress in the name negotiations.

15. (SBU) Crvenkovski also issued a stark warning on what he views as Gruevski's "we can make it without NATO" attitude, warning that populism won't get Macedonia what NATO and EU integration will. In his December State of the Republic address, Crvenkovski said "by using populism and misusing patriotic feelings of the citizens, by dividing into patriots and traitors, but creating the sense that we want to be in NATO and the EU but we do not have to, and that the Government has an alternative strategy for a comprehensive, economic, democratic and social development of the country outside of Euro-Atlantic structures we are setting the foundation for a major historic defeat." He added, "in the choice the Government is currently offering in Macedonia -- that someone either support its policies or be proclaimed a traitor -- I voluntarily and with full responsibility decide to remain on its list of traitors. And I have no doubt that time will show what true patriotism is and who true patriots are."

16. (C) While he views the PM as at the center of the populist and, in his view, isolationist strategies, he also sees FM Milososki as adding fuel to the fire. Crvenkovski told the Ambassador privately that while he thinks Milososki is "brighter than Gruevski," he's been amazed and disappointed at the Foreign Minister's tendency to "out-Gruevski Gruevski" with isolationist or reactionary stances.

His View of the Problems Ahead

17. (C) Increasingly concerned about the economy, Crvenkovski thinks that the PM and VMRO-DPMNE Government are hiding their heads in the sand and ignoring the looming crisis. Crvenkovski views the Government as incapable of attracting foreign investment and compounding the problem with irresponsible fiscal policy, citing the millions spent on monuments and the Government's continued insistence to fund construction of an Orthodox church on Skopje's main square. At a recent dinner, President Crvenkovski also told the Ambassador privately that he believes Gruevski is also "milking the budget" to his own benefit through two streams -- (1) his cousins the Mijalkov brothers, Sasho (Director of Security of Counterintelligence) and Vladimir (Advisor to the Head of Customs Vanco Kargov); and 2) DPM Zoran Stavreski and Vlatko Cingoski, President of the state-owned electricity producer ELEM.

18. (C) Inter-ethnic issues, in Crvenkovski's view, have also been "dangerously neglected" by PM Gruevski. He believes the PM and Government did not do enough ahead of June 2008 parliamentary elections to stop the rising intra-Albanian violence, saying that Gruevski "started the gladiator battle" between rival parties DPA and DUI (reftel D) by promising each a place in the future governing coalition. While Crvenkovski is highly critical of the PM's dismissive handling of ethnic Albanian issues, he has not taken on a single ethnic Albanian in his own cabinet. His talk may be more enlightened than his actions on inter-ethnic issues. As noted, his party has not joined VMRO in moving on key issues for the ethnic Albanian community (language law, Kosovo recognition).

His Successor

¶9. (C) Gjorge Ivanov, Crvenkovski's successor, due to take office on May 12, brings no political experience and very little charisma or personal presence to the table. He is an academic also lacking in experience with foreign interlocutors. Crvenkovski said Ivanov "doesn't know what he's in for." Ahead of the presidential elections, Ivanov rarely met with anyone in the international community without bringing DPM (and his former student) Ivica Bocevski with him. The pattern has remained the same since he has become President-elect. In a post-election congratulatory meeting with the Ambassador, Ivanov, accompanied by Bocevski, spoke only of his plans to start a new inaugural tradition, bringing in presidents of neighboring countries. In an awkward meeting, Ivanov could not be coaxed to speak of anything remotely substantive, and only nodded when the Ambassador suggested he reach out to those who did not vote for him, including the ethnic Albanian community, and to include ethnic minorities in his cabinet.

What he Returns To

¶10. (C) Politically, Crvenkovski returns to a party in shambles, with SDSM suffering staggering losses in 2008 parliamentary and 2009 municipal and presidential elections. In addition to its losses at the ballot box, SDSM faces a substantial debt of nearly 2 million Euros. Undeterred, Crvenkovski spoke at a March dinner with the Ambassador of plans to resurrect the party. He envisions creating a "shadow government" and plans for the process to take nearly a year, beginning with a party congress on May 24 where he expects to be re-elected as President of the party. Crvenkovski recently told the Ambassador that he will bring in experts and consultants in an effort to jump-start the party reorganization. Interim SDSM President Zoran Zaev, recently re-elected Mayor of Strumica in one of SDSM's very few mayoral wins, will not challenge Crvenkovski for the party presidency, and it is not clear what role he or other current SDSM leaders will play following the re-shuffle. Crvenkovski blames Zaev and other SDSM leaders for the state of the party, saying the party's massive defeat in 2008 parliamentary elections was due to its lost identity, as the party appeared "even more nationalistic than Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE" and flip-flopped on key issues such as the name issue, and support for the Ohrid Framework Agreement (reftel E). Despite the challenges ahead of SDSM, PM Gruevski has told the Ambassador that he sees Crvenkovski as formidable opposition.

¶11. (C) Personally, Crvenkovski, his wife and two teenaged children return to a flat of only 60 square meters, no doubt a bit of a shock to the system after life in the Presidential residence (and earlier, the Prime Ministerial quarters). His love of fine whiskey, basketball, and political intrigue may provide some distraction. Crvenkovski might also be distracted by legal battles, as the Government seems to increasingly wield the threat of charges/arrests against its political opponents. Crvenkovski personally claims not to be concerned about possible charges against him.

¶12. (C) Comment: Crvenkovski has been a key player since (and before) Macedonia's independence. He will continue to be an important force in Macedonian politics, and presents possibly the only chance for SDSM to regain its relevance. If SDSM rises from the ashes, we expect that Euro-Atlantic integration will remain the centerpiece of the party's platform, and that the party's approach to Greece and the name dispute would be more strategically intelligible and less intentionally provocative than VMRO's. That said, the road to relevance ahead for Crvenkovski and his party is a tough one -- at the local level where SDSM holds only 7 mayoral seats to VMRO's 56, and at the national level where the party lost nearly 2 to 1 to VMRO in the 2008 Parliamentary race and in the recent Presidential election. But Crvenkovski, an experienced politician and strategist, is determined to succeed and has the track record to back it up.

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